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Bibliogr.

Figures.

1. Peinture et décoration murales médiévales — Liban. 2. Art chrétien — Liban — 500-1500 (Moyen âge).

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MEDIEVAL SYRIAC MURAL PAINTINGS IN MOUNT LEBANON

BY
Fr. Abdo BADWI

In the northern part of Mount Lebanon, particularly in the region extending from Byblos to the Wādī Qādīšā («The Holy Valley»), there are numerous churches with wall-paintings. Most of these churches nowadays belong to the cultural heritage of the Maronite Church, which is part of the great ecclesiastical heritage of the Syriac tradition. These wallpaintings represent the medieval and pre-Renaissance iconography of the Maronite churches, which can be dated between the 12th and 17th centuries. The following major wall-paintings belong to this period:

- 1 - Mār Šarbel the Martyr, Maʿād (Byblos)
- 2 - Mār Nohrā, Eddeh (Byblos)
- 3 - Mār Nohrā & Sophia, Dmaṣā (Byblos)
- 4 - Mār Eliās, Blāṭ (Byblos)
- 5 - Saydet Qaṣṣūbā (Byblos)
- 6 - Mār Sābā, Eddeh (Batrūn)
- 7 - Mār Antonios, Eddeh (Batrūn)
- 8 - Saydet el-Bzāz, Sghar (Batrūn)
- 9 - Mār Nohrā, Smar Jbeil (Batrūn)
- 10 - Mār Semʿān (Symeon), Kfūn (Byblos)
- 11 - Deir eṣ-Šalīb, Ḥadšīt (Bešarreh)
- 12 - Mārt Šmūneh, Ḥadšīt (Bešarreh)
- 13 - Our Lady of Qannūbīn (Qādīšā)
- 14 - Mār Ġirġis, Raškīdā (Batrūn)
- 15 - The Ethiopian wall-paintings: Mār Asyā, Mār Ġirġis, and Mār Yūḥannā (Qādīšā).

Some Greek-Orthodox monasteries and churches may be added to this list:

- 16 - Monastery of Saydet Hamaṭūrā, Kosbā (Kūrā)
- 17 - Monastery of Mār Dimitrios, Kosbā (Kūrā)
- 18 - Mār Phocas, Amyūn (Kūrā)

- 19 - Saydet Bargūn (Kūrā)
- 20 - Mgāret Mārīnā, Qalamūn (Tripoli)
- 21 - Mār Eliās en-Nahr, Kfar Hawrā (Zgārtā)
- 22 - Saydet en-Nūriyyeh, Hāmāt (Kūrā)
- 23 - Mār Ġirġis, Hāmāt (Kūrā)
- 24 - Saydet er-Rīh, Enfeh (Kūrā)

It should be noted that in those regions several churches and monasteries have passed from one christian community to another.

The wall-paintings found in these places are a mixture of Syriac, Byzantine, and even Romanesque elements. This has led some scholars to regard them as byzantine or Romanesque paintings, but nobody talked about their syriac elements and particularities.

These paintings are followed after the sixteenth century by some murals, like those of the church of Qannūbīn, which have been executed according to a mixed technique and style, may be termed post-iconographic and post-Renaissance. The themes are more and more Latin. In particular, the appearance of clair-obscur can be observed, however they are applied with the graphic expression and with some elements of the traditional iconography. A characteristic example is the wall-painting of the coronation of the Holy Virgin in Qannūbīn. While the theme of this painting is Latin, its constituent parts are a mixture: the sun and the moon belong to the Syriac iconographic tradition, the lamb and the triangular haloes are Western features, the expression is iconographic, and the representation of the human body shows the influence of the Renaissance. To some extent, one is reminded here of the so-called Melkite icons.

Our paper on these wall-paintings will consist of the following sections:

- 1 - Historical study
- 2 - Iconographical study
- 3 - A characteristic example: Baḥdīdāt
- 4 - The syriacity of those paintings:
 - A - The syriac elements: iconography, inscriptions ...
 - B - Comparison with the paintings of Nabk and Qārā in Syria
 - C - Comparison with the syriac miniatures
- 5 - Conclusion and perspective.

I - HISTORICAL STUDY

It was Ernest Renan who, in 1864, first drew attention to some of the above mentioned churches¹. He was followed by Father Maurice Tallon in 1910², by Father Henri Lammens in 1921³, and by Charles Diehl in 1927⁴. They all agreed that these paintings represent Syrian art of Byzantine style and each of them provided a detailed description of what existed in his time. In 1982, Erica Dodd, in «Archéologie au Levant», studied the paintings of St Shmuneh, which have now disappeared. She is presently preparing a study of other churches which are included in the list above.

The paintings started to attract a wider attention, both from scholars and other interested people, after the seventies, particularly after the local communities woke up and committed themselves to the rediscovery of their cultural heritage.

In 1987, Father Yūḥannā Sader⁵, in his book «Peintures murales dans des églises maronites médiévales», made a description of the paintings of three churches: Baḥdīdāt, Maʿād and Eddeh.

Father Sader also, in 1997, continued the description of the other paintings in his book «Painted churches and rock-cut chapels of Lebanon»⁶.

Guita G. Hourani⁷ published an article with colour reproductions on the paintings of Baḥdīdāt in the Journal of Maronite Studies.

Recently, in 1999, Lévon Nordiguian and Jean-Claude Voisin in their book «Châteaux et Églises du Moyen-Age au Liban»⁸, did a descriptive and comparative study of these paintings with a large spread out of color illus-

1) E. RENAN, *Mission de Phénicie*, Paris, 1864.

2) M. TALLON, «Une église libanaise à peintures célèbres», in *Al-Machriq* 3, Beyrouth, 1970.

3) H. LAMMENS, *Tasrīḥ al-abṣār* I, 1913.

4) Ch. DIEHL, *Comptes rendus de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, Paris, 1927.

5) Y. SADER, *Peintures murales dans des églises maronites médiévales*, Dar Sader, Beyrouth, 1987.

6) Y. SADER, *Painted churches and rock-cut chapels of Lebanon*, Dar Sader, Beirut, 1997.

7) G. HOURANI, «The Journal of Maronite Studies of the Maronite American Research Institut (MARI)», 1,2 (April 20, 1997);
on Internet: <http://www.mari.org/jms/april97/coverstory.htm>.

8) Lévon NORDIGUIAN, Jean-Claude VOISIN, *Châteaux et Églises du Moyen-Age au Liban*, Éditions Terre du Liban, Éditions Trans-Orient, Beyrouth, 1999.

trations. So far, it is the first approximately complete photographic collection of these paintings.

Nada H  lou⁹ in «Wall Paintings in Lebanese Churches», Leiden University, also did a description of these paintings, and in «La repr  sentation de la D  sis-Vision dans deux   glises du Liban»¹⁰.

A. Rousseau, in *La revue Arch  logia*, displayed some of these paintings in an international project to safeguard them¹¹.

Rita Sawaya, few days ago, the 15th of June 2000, presented a detailed iconographic study on the paintings of Ma  ad, as a D.E.A. project in sacred art.

I myself have dealt with the Lebanese wall-paintings in several articles published in various local periodicals as well as in notes for students in Christian Archaeology and Art. Moreover, I have used these paintings as a source of inspiration for my own works and for the wall decorations of various Maronite and Syriac churches.

In the Sacred Art Department of the Holy Spirit University, we are preparing an inventory of these paintings which will be published next year.

These churches may be divided into two architectural types:

1. The type of the cave churches or semi-troglodytic churches, such as M  rt   m  neh, Deir e  -  al  b, Our Lady of Qann  bin, M  r Sem  an K  f  n, Saydet ed-Dorr, and Saydet Nea.

2. The type of churches built with one, two or with three apses, represented by the remaining churches of the list.

On the basis of their architecture, most of the churches can be dated to the period of the Crusaders, a fact which has led some scholars to express a categorical judgement, attributing the paintings of these churches to the Crusaders. This may be correct for the apse of Ma  ad and for the paintings of the second layer in the southern annex to this apse.

As far as architecture is concerned, Ba  d  d  t has served as the proto-

9) Nada H  LOU, *Wall paintings in Lebanese churches, Essays on Christian Art and culture in the Middle East*, vol. 2, Leiden, 1999.

10) Nada H  LOU, «La repr  sentation de la D  sis-Vision dans deux   glises du Liban», in *Parole de l'Orient* 23 (1998) 1-27.

11) A. ROUSSEAU, «Peintures murales: un projet international pour leur sauvegarde», in *Archeologia* 342 (f  vrier 1998) 22-29.

type of at least five churches of the region. The type with three apses found in Maʿād may have been imported by the Crusaders.

What was the origin of these churches? Maronite, Jacobite, Byzantine or Melkite? This is a thorny question. However, as I have mentioned above, there has been exchange between the three communities as well as reuse and adaptation from one tradition to the other. As a matter of fact, this explains why these paintings have been neglected by the Maronites, who at a certain time regarded this iconographic genre as heretic.

II - ICONOGRAPHICAL STUDY

Renan describes Baḥdīdāt as follows: «The church deserves attention. It is old and the paintings with which it is decorated on the inside may be regarded as one of the most precious specimens of Syrian art». With respect to Maʿād he adds: «The church of Maʿād is very noteworthy... the chapel, behind the church, contains the best. They are the same genre of those mentioned at Baḥdīdāt and those found in Kfar Šleimān. Although Syrian art is not destined to occupy an important place in the history of art, it would be worthwhile to document these paintings one day. An interesting annex to the history of Byzantine art the result will be».

On the basis of water colour copies made by Tutundji, Virolleaud concludes with regard to the paintings of Baḥdīdāt that these are of Cappadocian inspiration.

Dodd links the paintings of Mārt Šmūneh with the artistic context created in Palestine in the period of the Crusaders, basing her conclusion on a sole comparison with Cappadocian wall-paintings of the twelfth century.

With respect to the paintings of Maʿād, it should be noted that there is a great difference between the first layer of the paintings of the annex chapel on one hand, and the paintings of the second layer and of the apse on the other.

Anyhow, these paintings remain to be studied, moreover since no complete study has been undertaken so far. Except for Baḥdīdāt, Maʿād, Ed-deh, and Mārt Šmūneh, we have to do with virgin soil, even if there are the few descriptions mentioned above. Considering these paintings separately, we will find for each of them an individual iconographic identity, despite the relationship which may exist between some of them in style, theme, composition, and technique.

The paintings may be classified as follows:

1. Baḥḍidāt, Kfūn, Mārt Šmūneh, and Qannūbīn-crypt: a developed Syriac style;
2. Maʿād-annex (first layer) and Kfar Šleimān (the nursing Virgin or Galactotrophusa): a local primitive style;
3. Maʿād-chapel, Maad-annex (second layer), and the cave of St Marīnā: a style which is rather romanesque or has undergone romanesque influence;
4. Eddeh and Deir eṣ-Šalīb (except the Crucifixion): a style with Byzantine features of Cypriot influence;
5. Kosbā, Hamaṭūrā, St Phocas, and Bargūn: a purely Byzantine style posterior to the 14th century.
6. Saydet ed-Dorr: a particular identity which at present cannot be properly determined;
7. Qannūbīn-church: Maronite painting of the 16th-17th century, a mixture of iconographic style which reminds us of what nowadays is called «Melkite iconography».

III – A CHARACTERISTIC EXAMPLE: BAḤḌĪDĀT

We have taken this as a typical example, considering the fact that its iconographical cycle is complete and that its paintings are the best preserved ones.

The paintings of Bahdidat can be divided into four parts:

1. THE UPPER APSE OR DEISIS

This is a classical iconographical composition. The «Aḥīdḥūl» (Pantocrator), of relatively big size, sits on a throne between the suppliant Holy Virgin and John the Baptist and is surrounded by the Tetramorph, Cherubs and Seraphs holding banderoles with the Syriac text of the Trisagion.

2. THE LOWER APSE OR THE TWELVE APOSTLES

In this part the Twelve Apostles are standing in painted arcs, their names are written in Syriac.

3. THE ARC OF THE APSE

In the middle there is a window, in the center of a non-identified figure inside a circle, may be the Emmanuel traditional iconography, above the sun and the moon. To the left, the sacrifice of Isaac, in which the replacing ram is painted outside the arc on the vault of the ceiling. To the right, Moses receiving the Decalogue from the hand of God. To the left, the archangel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation, and opposite, the Virgin Mary, who is seated.

In the lower part, to the left, the prophet Daniel and to the right St Stephan, the protomartyr.

4. THE HOLY KNIGHTS ON THE LATERAL WALLS

On the northern lateral wall, near the arc, St Theodore (Tādroš), part of whom is damaged as a result of the opening of a window in recent times. Opposite, on the southern lateral wall, St Georges.

DATE

Sader dates the paintings of Bahdidat to the 12th century, more precisely even to the years 1189-1192, i.e. to the period of the third Crusade. He ascribes these paintings to Western artists who came to Baḥḍidāt on the occasion of this Crusade. In this respect, Sader bases his opinion on the suppositions of his predecessors¹².

A Syriac manuscript relates that in 1256 the deacon Behnam, son of the parish priest Naʿmān, was ordained as Jacobite priest for the church of Mār Tādroš of Baḥḍidāt¹³.

This date historically proves the existence of the church of St Theodore in that year, although the paintings are not mentioned.

The scientific dating on the basis of laboratory investigation as well as of various present-day techniques has not yet taken place.

TECHNIQUE

Is this a traditional fresco? I do not think so. As can be seen on the

12) Y. SADER, *Peintures murales dans des églises maronites médiévales*, Dar Sader, Beyrouth, 1987, p. 52.

13) Ph. DE TARAẒI, *Aṣḍaq mā kān fī tāriḥ Lubnān*, 1, pp. 162-163.

damaged parts, it is a painting executed with lively colours on the layer of plaster (*sur crépis*) and with a non-identified distemper. There have been attempts at restoration, especially in the northern lower part of the apse. It is wiser not to venture suppositions before scientific investigations have been carried out.

Here, I would like to mention a restoration project of the Baḥdidāt paintings, prepared by the Sacred Art Department of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik, Lebanon, in cooperation with Leiden University and the Duch Embassy in Beirut. This project should have started in October 1999, but failed because of internal problems within the Lebanese General Directorate of Antiquities. We hope to relaunch this project very soon.

STYLE AND ICONOGRAPHY

As we have noted above, Renan, Lammens, and others have classed Baḥdidāt as well as the other paintings as Byzantine, or rather Cappadocian paintings. Sader ascribes them to western and even romanesque artists¹⁴.

As for my own position, comparing Bahdidat with the paintings of Nebk, which the other scholars – except Erica Dodd – did not know, I think that there is an iconographic similarity between the Bahdidat, Maṣād and other lebanese paintings and those of Nebk as well as of Qārā. This means that there is a common element in these paintings, which is based on a salient graphic expression and on geometric ornamentation. The so-called Byzantine iconographic composition is always present, as in the Deisis, for example. The Saints riding horses are typical; a relationship may be established with Nebk, Eddeh, Kfar Šleimān, and even with the Cappadocian horsemen, such as St Georges of the chapel nr. 28 of Goreme¹⁵.

The Annunciation on both sides of the arc of the apse is a very ancient composition, which can be found in Sta Maria Maggiore in Rome, in the manuscript of Rabbūlā¹⁶ and which has survived in the volets of the central doors (or royal doors') of the Byzantine iconostasis.

14) SADER, 1987, p. 52 (see note 6).

15) G. DE JERPHANION, *Les églises rupestres de Cappadoce*, 5 vol., Paris, 1925-1934.

16) *L'évangélaire de Rabboula*, V^e s., Bibl. Laurent. Florence, f. 4a.

IV - THE SYRIACITY OF THOSE PAINTINGS

A - THE SYRIAC ELEMENTS: ICONOGRAPHY, INSCRIPTIONS ...

The first element proving the syriacity of a big part of those painting, is the syriac inscription and calligraphy present in them. We will try to display the most readable and clear ones:

1. BAḤDĪDĀT:

All the represented figure have their names written aside, some in a vertical way and others horizontal, add to this the trisagion on the Cherub and Seraph banderoles.

2. MAṢĀD:

The same as in Baḥdīdāt, in the apse and in the Dormition.

3. EDDEH:

Even if the style is more byzantine, the syriac inscriptions exist in the paintings.

4. KFŪN:

Like Maṣād, the same type with some late vandalistic graffitis in syro-arabic calligraphy.

5. DEIR EṢ-ṢALĪB:

Some letters remains, but the most interesting is the vertical inscription on the Crucifixion mural.

6. QANNŪBĪN:

We have a mixture of syriac and karshouni inscriptions in the various paintings.

These inscriptions vary from the serto to the square calligraphy to an estranghelo like. Sometime it becomes a graffiti more than a regular inscription.

B - COMPARISON WITH THE PAINTINGS OF NABK AND QĀRĀ IN SYRIA

The only scholar who has really pointed to this problem is Erica Dodd, when she studied the paintings of Mārt Šmūneh and Nebk. She concluded her article on Mārt Šmūneh as follows¹⁷:

«Qaddīštā Šmūnī should be evaluated in context with other paintings in Syria and Lebanon».

Moreover, she touched on the same subject in her article on the paintings of Mār Mūssā Nebk, where she likewise concludes:

«Wall paintings in the mountains of Lebanon lend further insight to this problem in an area that has, until recently, been limited to manuscripts. When the paintings in Lebanon have been illustrated and their relationship with Syria understood, some of the artistic problems connected with the Mediterranean and artistic traffic during the period of the Crusades may become clearer».

In any case, the common elements are many. The first layer of Mār Mūssā may be of significance to explain the small detail of the archer with the Cross of Kfar Šleimān. The Last Judgement of Mār Mūssā and the Dormition of the annex chapel of Ma'ād have a common graphic expression. The apse of Baḥdīdāt, the paintings of Qārā, the apse of Mār Mūssā and Mārt Šmūneh likewise show similarities in graphic expression and coloration. There even may be a strong affinity between the Galactotrophusa of Kfar Šleimān and some sections of the paintings under the lateral arches of Mār Mūssā.

C - COMPARISON WITH THE SYRIAC MINIATURES

There is a big affinity with the syriac miniatures, especially with the manuscripts of the same period (XII-XIIIth century) as the B.M. add.7170¹⁸, and the Vat.Syr. 495¹⁹ and others, especially the ones mentioned in Jules Leroy²⁰.

This comparison is very clear and it is seen in the anatomical proportions, for example the rounded faces, the anatomical proportions which is one in both paintings between 1/6.2 and 1/6.5.

17) E. DODD, «The Monastery of Mar Musa al-Habashi near Nebek, Syria», in *Arte Medievale*, 11 Serie, Anno VI, n. 1 (Rome, 1992) 61-144; *id.*, 1982 (see note 5).

18)

19)

20) Jules LEROY, *Les Manuscrits Syriaques a Peintures*, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1964.

Baḥdīdāt is a typical example where the Syriac style is very clear, above all in the representation of the twelve apostles around the altar, with their small size, which would be the anatomic proportion of 1/6.2.

Other elements, as well as the presence of the Sun and the Moon which is a cosmic presence adapted by the syriac world from a mesopotamian tradition. Another element is the Chirophany which is often employed in the syriac iconography and goes back to the sixth century (in Rabbūlā Gospels Book).

The graphic and linear drawing and painting with the *naif* style, are typical for this part of the world which could not or did not achieve the byzantine imperial perfection in iconography, as Renan said above.

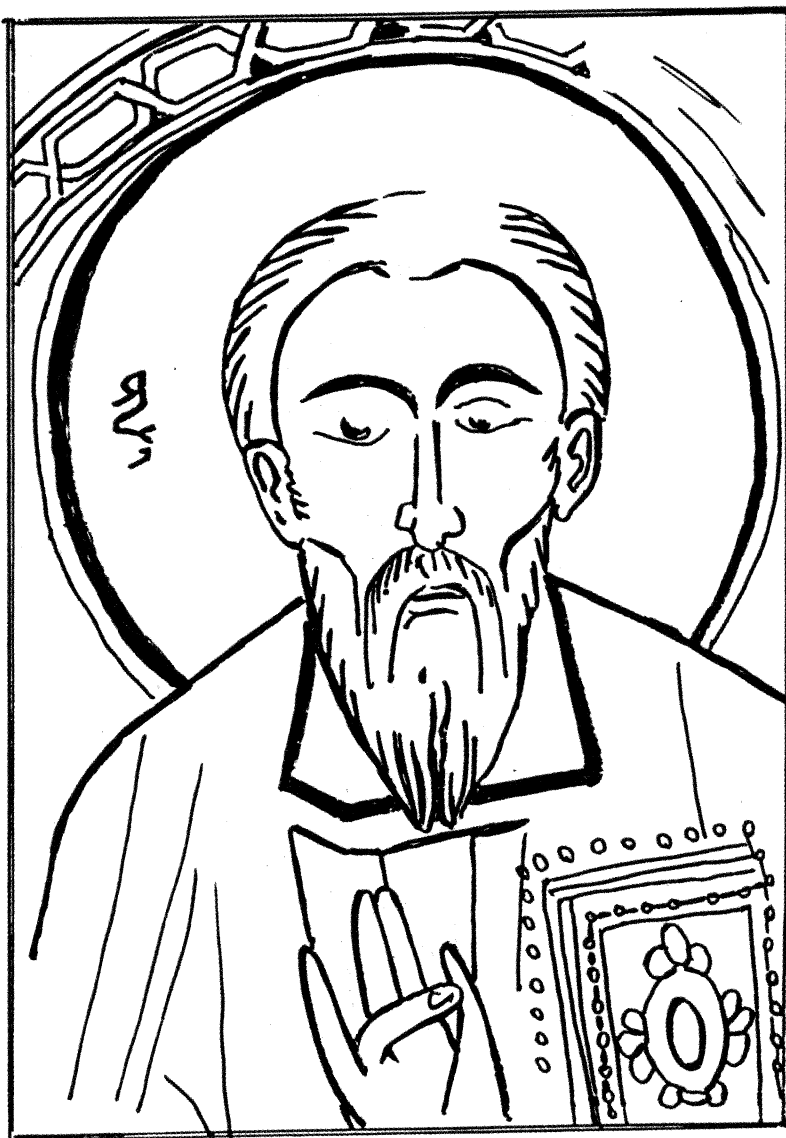
This summary presentation is only a prelude to a more detailed study of the common elements of these iconographic wallpaintings which belong to the common heritage of the Church of Antioch.

CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVE

Let us conclude with an appeal to our universities and to our dear colleagues who have an interest in the field, to commit themselves to further research as well as to explore how we could proceed in order to restore and preserve this heritage which is so dear to us.

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Bahdidat, Matthew the Apostle



Maad, Bishop, central apse



Eddeh, Two Apostles



Deir es-Salib



Qannubin